DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 462 CG 014 310

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TITLE Discrepancies in Diversion Research: Some Possible Explanations.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Mental Health (DHEW), Rockville, Md. Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency.
PUB DATE 79
GRANT NIMH-MH-29160
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (87th, New York, NY, September 1-5, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents: Behavior Modification: Delinquency: *Delinquent Rehabilitation: Juvenile Courts: *Program Evaluation: *Rehabilitation Programs: *Research Methodology: State of the Art Reviews: *Success: Youth Problems: Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Diversion Programs

ABSTRACT

The lack of rigorous evaluations and variations in operation of adolescent diversion programs has led to a state of confusion concerning the effects of diversion. In a program at Michigan State University, youths referred to the project from the juvenile court are randomly assigned to undergraduates who are trained and supervised by project personnel or to a control group which receives treatment as usual. The standard 18-week intervention involves a combination of child advocacy and behavioral contracting. Results have been positive, but not conclusive. Project youth tend to have fewer and less serious police and court contacts and better school performance when compared to control youth. A major focus of the research has been to identify the conditions under which such a diversion program can be successful. What is done with the adolescent after diversion appears to affect his/her potential re-involvement with the system. Variations in this, as well as other variables, e.g., where in the system the youth is diverted, who administers the diversion program, and the type of youth diverted, are likely to account for a wide variety of results found by diversion programs. (Author)

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Discrepancies in Diversion Research

Some Possible Explanations

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CG 014 310

This paper was presented at the 87th annual convention of the American Psychological Association, New York, New York, 1979. This work was completed under a grant from the Center for the Studies of Crime and Delinquency from the National Institute of Mental Health #MH29160.

Discrepancies in Diversion Research:

Some Possible Explanations

In attempting to assess the effectiveness of diversion, the researcher has two basic methodological options. The first is to study diversion as it is actually practiced by evaluating existing programs. This method gains its validity from the fact that it allows an examination of what happens when the philosophy and policy of diversion are transferred into actual practice. Unfortunately, this testing of diversion as practiced may not be a fair test of the actual concept of diversion. The individuals and organizations who attempt to implement diversion programs also need to respond to a variety of economic, legal, political, and social concerns. As highlighted in the literature on diversion to date, these concerns result in the variety of mutations of diversion observed today, with a corresponding inconsistency of outcome results.

A second basic method for addressing the effectiveness of diversion is to develop a model program for evaluation. If this program can be developed and administered with minimal external pressures, there is a greater likelihood of avoiding some of the pitfalls that threaten the effectiveness of other diversion efforts. Furthermore, the evaluation of the program can be considered a prime concern, as opposed to an afterthought. Planning the evaluation concurrently with the program itself allows for a much more powerful research design than attempting to tack an evaluation onto an already existing program.

With these considerations in mind, this latter method (the development and evaluation of a model program) is the strategy that we have employed. Research was designed to be an experimental examination of diversion as it "should" be practiced. In particular, the following characteristics of this diversion project are worthy of note. First, care was taken to insure an appropriate selection of youth. Specifically, only adolescents who would have had further involvement with the formal juvenile justice system, had the project not been available, were

accepted into the project. Second, services to the youth in the project were provided on a consistent and intense level. Those providing the services received considerable training and were carefully supervised. The relationships with referral agencies (the police and juvenile court) were strong and positive, yet the project retained its independence from these agencies.

Additional concerns worthy of consideration in such a planned evaluation are alternative or supportive dependent measures and adequate process assessment. All too often, official crime rate is too infrequent in occurrence to serve as a sole dependent measure in an evaluative paradigm though these official rates (measure of police and court official's behavior) are extremely important. The inclusion of self-reported estimates of delinquent behavior should strengthen any design. On the other hand, due to the varied diversionary programs in existence, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make generalized statements about the utility of diversionary programs per se. This leads to the necessity for the inclusion of extensive process measures designed to assess specifically what processes are occurring that lead to the resultant outcome conclusions (Kantrowitz, et al., 1978)

It was felt that developing and evaluating this strong model of diversion was a good place to start in attempting to assess the effectiveness of diversion. If the program was not effective under these conditions, it would be unlikely that it would work under the conditions most programs are forced to operate. On the other hand, if it was effective, it would then be possible to continue the research to try to begin to understand the conditions that are responsible for its success. Having substantially demonstrated positive overall results, the project is presently at the stage of attempting to identify these crucial components of the successful use of diversionary intervention programs.

A brief history of the project, its method, and its results is in order. The project began in 1973 at the University of Illinois as part of a larger program designed to assess the effectiveness of undergraduate volunteers working with

various target groups. The adolescent project received referrals from the police. The youths referred would otherwise have had petitions filed against them and would have been sent to the juvenile court. The adolescents were then randomly assigned to the project or to a control group that was released outright with no treatment given. The experimental youth (those assigned to the project) were assigned to an undergraduate who was trained and supervised by members of the project staff (usually graduate students). The student and youth had 6-8 hours of contact every week for an 18-week duration. Two intervention strategies were employed with the youth. The first, behavioral contracting, was designed as an attempt to improve the interpersonal contingencies between the youth and significant others, usually the parents. The second, advocacy, was designed to protect the youth's rights and to generate and mobilize community resources to fulfill the youth's needs.

The Illinois program was operated as a research project between 1973 and 1975 before the administration was transferred to a community youth agency. The results of the research with respect to the youth can be summarized as follows. Youths referred to the project were far superior to the control group with respect to frequency and seriousness of police contacts and frequency and seriousness of court petitions filed. These findings were true for the period during program intervention as well as during a two year followup period. Youth outcomes concerning school attendance and grades were not clear-cut, though they tended to indicate a positive effect of program participation. A comparison of the two intervention techniques, behavioral contracting and advocacy, indicated that they were essentially equally effective and superior to the control condition (Davidson, 1976). A variety of questionnaire measures (including self-report delinquency) failed to demonstrate significant program effects.

The Illinois experience indicated that the practice of diversion had some validity and had displayed at least some effectiveness. At that point it seemed reasonable to begin to further investigate the salient factors relating to this

effectiveness. One step in this direction was to replicate the program in another setting to determine if some unique characteristics associated with the original setting were responsible. The Adolescent Diversion Project was replicated at Michigan State University beginning in 1976. The only significant change in the program's operations was that referrals came from the county probate court as opposed to the police (the referral point is immediately after a preliminary hearing has been held to investigate the case). Youth referred to the project are randomly assigned to the project or a control group. The control group is returned to the court's intake division where they then receive the normal court treatment.

The basic contracting/advocacy intervention has continued to be employed. Results indicate that youths receiving this treatment consistently had fewer and less serious police and court contacts. Again, school related outcomes have been mixed. While self-report results have not been consistent, it appears that the diverted youth report less delinquent behavior than do youth receiving normal court treatment. As noted earlier, official delinquency (as measured by police and court records) and self-reported delinquency each have their own advantages and disadvantages as measures of delinquency. To have the diverted youth show less delinquency by <u>both</u> methods of measurement helps build a strong case for the effectiveness of this version of diversion.

Again, one of the purposes of replicating the project has been to dissect the model in order to more clearly identify what components of diversion (as practiced in the Illinois project) made it successful. Therefore, several dimensions of the intervention have been varied at different times in order to more carefully explore the usefulness of diversion. Youth referred to the project were randomly assigned not only to project and control groups, but also randomly assigned to different treatment conditions within the project. Students working with the youth were also randomly assigned to groups which received different training, instruction, and supervision representing these different interventions.

Variations occurred in the content and intensity of training, as well as in the intensity of supervision. These different conditions and their outcomes will briefly be discussed below.

Each group was designed to experimentally test hypotheses about the salient factors in the model. For instance, it was hypothesized that perhaps the specific techniques of contracting and advocacy were of minimal importance and that instead, specific techniques using a different theoretical foundation and content would be as effective. To test this, a "relationship" condition was constructed, in which the students were given training and practice in using relationship building communication and problem-solving skills. The intervention consisted of the students developing a relationship with the youth and helping the youth to understand and modify his/her situation and needs within the framework of interpersonal relationships. The outcomes for these youth were only slightly less favorable than the contacting/advocacy group and still superior to the control group.

Students in the project had always received relatively intensive training and close supervision of their cases. The extent to which this was critical to the success of the project was also an empirical question. Therefore, the "low intensity" condition was formed. This condition was designed to approximate a more typical situation in which volunteers work with youth. Therefore, the students received six hours of training (as opposed to the project norm of 20) which consisted of basic orientation to the nature of delinquency, the theories that have attempted to explain it, the history and structure of the juvenile court, and some general instruction in getting along with the youth. After the students were assigned to the adolescents, they met once a month for supervision (as opposed to the project norm of weekly supervision). Within this low intensity condition, one further dimension was experimentally manipulated. Half of the students were trained and supervised in groups of eight, as were the other students in the project.

The other half met in a larger group of 15. This was a further attempt to match the conditions of more "typical" volunteer programs.

Essentially, this low intensity condition acted as an attention placebo. While the students in this condition saw their youth as frequently as did students in the other conditions, they were given very little instruction as to what kinds of intervention might be appropriate. This allowed us to further study the role of the specific intervention techniques as opposed to simply giving the youth attention (which others have suggested may be responsible for the project's success). The outcome results showed that the low intensity condition had significantly more court contacts than the contracting/advocacy group. This approach produced recidivism rates no lower than and in some cases higher than controls.

Another dimension which has been examined concerns not what intervention techniques are used, but rather, where they are applied. Much literature and therapeutic attention has been given to the role of the family in delinquency. The contracting/advocacy condition addresses itself to the family, but is equally concerned with school, employment, peers, and other critical social domains in the life of the youth. While these other areas have been considered important, it was unclear whether better results might be obtained by giving complete attention to what might be the most important area. Essentially, the difference is between putting a little effort into a lot of areas, or a lot of effort in one area. The family condition was given training in contracting and advocacy, but only instructed in how to apply these techniques to the family situation. Great emphasis was placed on contracting, since it is more relevant to the family than advocacy. In addition, training included information on the role of the family in delinquency.

The relative effectiveness of family intervention versus a more broadly focused intervention is somewhat unclear. The family condition was superior to the control group and slightly less successful than the broader contracting/

advocacy group, though this latter difference was not statistically significant. Results of a second family group will be available soon.

A question frequently asked by those interested in diversion concerns the degree of independence between diversion program and the system from which the youth has been diverted. Is it possible to have a successful diversion effort if the "diversion" consists of simply an alternative treatment by the system itself? To help answer that question, a "court" condition was established in which court staff train and supervise the students working with the youth. The same training methods and materials are used by both the regular contracting/advocacy group and the court group. Only the staff affiliation has been varied. Outcome results for this experiment will also be available soon.

A final interesting dimension presently being investigated concerns the characteristics of the people working with the youth. To date, the program has only involved undergraduates from large universities. Presently underway is a comparison of this population with students from a local community college, as well as community volunteers recruited by the court. This study will compare the effectiveness of these three populations in working with diverted youth.

By now the pattern and strategy of our efforts should be clear. To recap, we started with the development of what we felt was a strong model of diversion to see if it could succeed under positive conditions. After this initial success, we began to look more closely at the model in order to gain an understanding of the processes and conditions related to its effectiveness.

At this point, it is simplistic to ask, does diversion work? As mentioned before, there are simply too many variations on a theme. As in any "hot" area, the rising interest in the concept of diversion has led to a proliferation of a great diversity of actual practices, all operating under the title of diversion. The questions we are attempting to answer instead are, under what conditions does diversion work?

We can now begin to provide some empirically based answers to this question. It appears that what happens to the youth after diversion is important. The nature of the intervention provided, if any, can largely affect the chances for successful outcomes. Simply giving the youth personal contact and attention, even in relatively large doses, is not enough by itself to have notable positive effects. On the other hand, the provision of several specific, detailed forms of intervention has been successful in comparison with the control groups employed. In particular, the environmentally based strategies of advocacy and behavioral contracting have been consistently and conclusively shown to be useful. The results have been strong regardless of the breadth of the intervention (family only versus all social domains). Finally, an intervention method focusing on the relationship-building and the interpersonal skills of the youth also proved relatively successful.

It is clear that a certain degree of intensity of training and supervising of those providing the intervention is crucial. The training provided to students in the project is not only fairly extensive, but also very practical and specific. The weekly meetings, outside readings and practical exercises, in-class demonstrations and role plays, specific instructions to students, group problem solving, and high trainer-supervisor to student ratios all appear to increase the likelihood of positive results, though the relative importance of each of these components has not yet been empirically determined.

Ongoing research will continue this investigation into the dynamics of diversion and intervention. We continue to advocate the use of this staged model of research. At this point, we have a "black box" called diversion which we have seen work under some circumstances. We are now in the process of dismantling this box, and removing or modifying some of the components in order to better understand what factors affect its operation. This approach is costly and time-consuming. Given a limited subject population, there are a limited number of factors that can be tested in one period of time. Yet, the results obtained in this manner make a

significant contribution to our understanding of diversion. It is only through continuing such exploratory efforts that we can hope to alleviate the confusion that surrounds the concept of diversion and reduce the discrepancy that is found in the research on the effectiveness of diversion. Decisions concerning the future practice of diversion depend on the ability of social science to illuminate these issues.

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